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ABSTRACT

This report presents the highlights of a year's experience with the advisory approach to the in-service education of elementary school teachers. The term "advisory" is defined as in-service assistance to teachers that is provided only at their request, in terms of their own goals, and "in situ" rather than in formal courses; it is designed in such a way that teachers become self-reliant and independent. The report, based largely on the advisors' field notes, answers questions about what it is like to be an advisor, what problems arise in the course of using this approach, and how an advisory system should be designed. Section headings reflect the pilot's major objectives (e.g., Advisors' Personal Problems; Reaction of Teachers). (JA)

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THE ADVISORY APPROACH TO INSERVICE TRAINING

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Introduction

This report presents the highlights of a year's experience with the advisory approach to the inservice education of elementary school teachers. The term "advisory" is frequently associated with informal or open education (Armington, 1972; Amarel et. al., 1973). However, for the purposes of this project, the use of the term was not limited to open education. Rather, it refers to a set of inservice training strategies characterized by:

(a) providing inservice assistance to teachers only when such assistance has been requested by them,

(b) providing assistance in terms of the requestors' own goals, objectives and needs,

(c) providing such assistance in situ rather than in courses, institutes or seminars, and

(d) providing assistance in such a way as to increase the likelihood that teachers become more self-helpful and independent rather than helpless and dependent.

The latter characteristic--to increase teachers' self-helpfulness--is related to the assumption that helplessness can be learned, and that the provision of help carries with it the risk of teaching its recipients to inhibit self-helpfulness.

A major objective of this pilot study was to be able to answer questions about what it is like to be an advisor, what problems arise in the course of using this approach, and how an advisory system should be designed. To answer these questions, the advisors kept extensive field notes of their experiences. This report is based largely on the advisors' field notes. (Conceptualization of the advisory role can be found in Katz, 1971.)

General Description of the Project

Seven schools in both rural and metropolitan communities in central Illinois participated in the project. In two of the schools--one rural, one metropolitan--only one teacher participated. In the remaining five schools, more than two and as many as five teachers were advised.

Through the Area Service Center of the region, announcements of the availability of advisory services were distributed. Interested teachers were invited to request the service through the Center. Because the Area Service Center of this particular region has been actively involved in presenting workshops and conferences on open education, many of the requesting teachers were interested in obtaining assistance related to open education.

In each school in which teachers participated in the advisory project, the official consent and cooperation of the principal was obtained.

The two Advisors were experienced elementary school teachers, who also had extensive experience in training teachers. Both Advisors had a long standing interest in the advisory approach to working with teachers in schools and were involved in developing plans for the project.

The Advisory Approach: Activities of Advisors

At the beginning of the school year the Advisors met individually with teachers who had requested the advisory service. During initial meetings, Advisors explained their concepts of the advisory system, how they planned to make themselves available, and proposed a tentative schedule of visits to the schools. In schools in which two or more teachers were advised, teachers were invited to sign up in advance for appointments on a weekly basis.

A brief summary of the types of activities of the Advisors is presented below.

1. Locating, identifying and preparing instructional materials to meet specific instructional needs.
2. Assisting teachers with formulating plans for more effective room arrangements, for learning centers and interest centers.
3. Discussing and thinking through problems of managing classroom behavior, how to develop class rules, how to help specific individual children.
4. Providing moral support and being generally supportive; sharing with teachers the set-backs and difficulties they experienced themselves as teachers.
5. Alerting teachers to available resources to help them with instruction.
6. Relating information about the good and successful practices of one teacher to another and vice versa.
7. Giving informative feedback from their observations of the classroom activity.
8. Demonstrating (or modeling) methods and techniques of teaching.
9. Helping teachers to think through alternative methods and approaches to teaching specific skills and content.

The Problems of Advisors

Throughout the academic year the Advisors kept field notes in which they described the problems encountered.

Problems related to teachers

From time to time teachers and Advisors shared sensitive information to be held in confidence. Although no crises developed around such matters, those preparing to perform advisory services should establish a policy to guide them under these conditions. The requirements and expectations of those to whom teachers and Advisors are responsible (e.g., principals) would provide sources of conflict for the Advisor in matters of confidentiality.

On a few occasions Advisors found themselves in situations in which they undermined the authority of the teacher in the eyes of her own pupils. This problem is particularly closely associated with demonstrating methods or techniques. The relative merits and risks of demonstrating or modeling should be considered in the light of the potential impact such procedures may have on pupils' perception of their teachers' authority and competence.

A major aspect of the advisory approach as we conceived it was to resist the temptation to give "answers," "solutions" or direct advice. Our rationale was that succumbing to that temptation might serve to increase teachers' tendency to see themselves as consumers of "answers" and "solutions" rather than as generators of them. Advisors found that their resistance to such temptation undermined their credibility in the eyes of the teachers. Advisors suspected that when they refrained from making a few clear suggestions teachers wondered whether they really "knew their stuff." The need to establish credibility (of expertise) fairly early in the Advisor-teacher relationship overrode the earlier plan to abstain from explicit "answer"-giving. The optimum resolution of these conflicting demands of the interpersonal situation is not clear.

Advisors experienced some frustrations from the lack of sites where teachers could be taken to observe the kinds of practices they wanted to learn about.

Advisors had some problems over the termination of relationships with teachers. In one case, a teacher had little apparent need for help, although she requested it. The Advisor's limited time in that school could have been more fruitfully used with another teacher. The Advisor sensed that withdrawal would have greatly disappointed this teacher. In another case, an Advisor felt that a particular relationship with a teacher who needed much help was not developing along productive lines and that her time could have been used more fruitfully with other teachers. In such cases, termination of the relationship is also a delicate matter. Solutions to the problems presented by these two cases were not found.

Advisors noted unrelentingly in their accounts of their work that they perceived teachers to be lonely and/or suffering from a sense of isolation. Repeatedly, Advisors commented that teachers seemed to simply enjoy or indulge in the companionship they provided to teachers. Advisors had no official authority or power and no obligations to the school district authorities. But they did have their own experiences of trials and tribulations to share and held a non-judgmental posture toward the teachers advised. In this way teachers seemed to see them as interested and concerned colleagues, who were there to support them. The Advisors' field notes give the impression that alleviation of loneliness and isolation was a major effect of the advisory approach we used.

From time to time, Advisors demonstrated or modeled techniques and methods. On one occasion, an Advisor noted that a teacher's response to this demonstrating procedure was, "I could never be that good," indicating a sense of discouragement or fear of failure. In the case of other teachers,

Advisors noted that teachers commented on how much they had "picked up" by watching the Advisor interact with their pupils in the classroom. These mixed effects of demonstrating or modeling suggest that great caution is necessary in using demonstration as a method of inservice training.

Advisors reported that when helping teachers think through alternative solutions to instructional problems, teachers frequently seemed to gain insight into new approaches but were afraid to act upon those insights. Occasionally, Advisors had the impression that teachers asked for help in changing their classroom practices more because they felt peer pressure to do so, than because they identified their own practices as ineffective.

Problems related to administrators and district policy

In some cases, schools, and the districts they were part of, were locked into highly specified curriculum requirements which blocked teachers' readiness to try different methods and/or techniques. One school was caught in district-wide adoption of four major curriculum innovations being implemented simultaneously. In addition to the narrowing of teacher options this caused, the amount of time teachers were required to participate in special meetings related to these curricula seemed to lead to teacher exhaustion and feelings of great pressure. It is unlikely that our approach to the advisory system could be useful in such a district.

In one school the Advisor thought that the administrator in charge felt threatened by her presence and her warm rapport with teachers. The history of administrator-staff relationships in that school was a chequered one and the district had experienced considerable tension over teacher unionism. It was a difficult school for the Advisor to work in, but the teachers themselves were very eager to maintain the Advisory services.

Problems with the Procedures of Advising

The most persistent difficulty encountered by Advisors was the lack of sufficient time and assorted problems related to time.

1. Advisors spent large blocks of time en route (no less than 50 miles one way) and in inclement weather as well.

2. Teachers' time was greatly constrained by their daily work and assorted meetings. They often ended their working day too exhausted to worry about alternative methods, philosophies or even individual children. Apparently many teachers settle into patterns of ad hoc "coping with the day." Knowledge about the variety of ways in which teachers construct "maps" or "images" of their daily work would be very helpful.

3. Advisors felt that their services should not have been offered at the beginning of the school year. They noted that most teachers needed a settling-in period with their new pupils before they could identify problems for advisory services.

Advisors noted that, in their talks with teachers and from their own observations, the scheduling of visits as 1 day per week was not optimum. Experimentation with visits of 2 successive days every other week seemed to be much more rewarding for both Advisors and teachers. Factors involved in rescheduling are:

1. When the need for particular materials was identified, Advisors could bring them to the teacher the following day rather than the following week.

2. Some teachers seemed to need more than just a week between visits to think through things that had been discussed and to make plans for implementing new ideas.

3. Sometimes the weekly visit seemed to be a pressured situation. Teachers sometimes felt apologetic if they had not had a chance to try out strategy planned during the previous visit or to think through particular problems previously discussed. The resulting defensiveness of teachers seemed to undermine the quality of relationships the Advisors were striving to develop with teachers.

4. Advisors noted tnat the pressure of time made it difficult for them to learn as much as they needed to about local resources. It may be that Advisors could spend some of the early weeks of the school year finding out about local resources.

5. Advisors noted often the great frustration of using so much time to drive to the shcools. Nevertheless, Advisors also suggested that it is important for Advisors to be persons from out of town. They felt that their suggestions were seen as novel and a little different from the conventions of the school district. The out-of-town attribute of Advisors also helps teachers to see them as outside of the official hierarchy of their school district, and as people who have no power to sanction their practices.

6. Advisors noted that about 6 weeks before the end of the academic year, teachers began to "wind down" their efforts. They talked of alternative methods in terms such as "Next year I'll try that." This kind of psychological suspension of efforts to change (even though to pupils 6 weeks can be a lifetime) was unanticipated and deserves further study.

Advisors' Personal Problems

One of the principal objectives of this project was to find out what it is like to be an Advisor. In accordance, Advisors kept notes of the many sources of stress as well as satisfaction they experienced themselves.

Both Advisors experienced some discouragement when their early expectations concerning their effectiveness were tested in the course of implementing their plans. The constraints of time--theirs and teachers'--were oppressive. Beyond that, teachers seemed to focus on relatively superficial aspects of their teaching: materials, room arrangement, temporal organization, how to keep children busy when they finished their work early. Advisors were more sensitive to problems teachers had in their underlying relationships with individual children as well as the classroom group. They both felt that they had failed to get to the key issues they had expected to focus on.

The intention we had to help teachers in terms of their own goals and objectives, rather than the Advisors', was very difficult to implement. Advisors do indeed have preferences and ideologies of their own concerning teaching methods. To respect ideologies and methods which are not congenial to one's own preferences, is very difficult. Advisors felt more comfortable and more positively reinforced by those teachers whose ideologies came close to their own.

Advisors reported it was difficult to judge how well they were doing. A framework for evaluating or assessing progress and effectiveness had not been developed. Generally, the Advisors seemed to be looking for changes in teachers' behavior. Some of their effectiveness, however, may have been forestalling teachers' disintegration or maintaining stability

of teacher functioning.

Advisors reported what they saw as a persistent need to be alert and "high" on each working day. Time with each teacher was so short that "down" days had to be avoided. The Advisors felt that their own enthusiasm was potentially contagious; they noted that on the occasionsal days when they lacked enthusiasm teachers asked them, "What's wrong?" "Aren't you feeling well?" Possibly a teacher might construe that the Advisor's mood was promulgated by something in her own behavior.

Advisors suggested that they might have been strengthened if they had both worked in one school. In such a case, they would have intersected occasionally and provided much needed support for each other.

Reactions of Teachers*

Teachers were interviewed concerning their perceptions and judgments of the value of the Advisory Project. The interviews were informal and were performed with only a subsample of the total group of teachers served.

The teachers in this subsample viewed the Advisory Project as highly successful. All were extremely disappointed that the project would not continue another year. They felt that this kind of inservice assistance was extremely helpful in that it occurred within their classrooms. The commitment and input of the Advisors was recognized and greatly appreciated, as was the opportunity teachers had to receive constructive criticism of their own teaching efforts. Time was identified as the most salient constraint operating in this sort of endeavor. The most useful way to

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*Evaluation portion of this report was provided by Mr. Robert L. Wolf.

represent the feeling on the part of this respondent group is to provide natural samples of their own comments:

General Perceptions

Appreciated the opportunity to work with the advisor. I received all sorts of new ideas but, most importantly, I received the kind of support I greatly needed.

A terrific project that provided a great deal of help to our school.

It is a pity that this sort of inservice isn't continuing. This kind of effort is the most meaningful for children as well as teachers. It is more tangible. You can talk over things you would like to do. The advisor is objective and fair and, therefore, can provide much constructive help.

Teachers grew to be fond of advisor as a person and began to share all sorts of problems with her--even problems of a very personal nature.

The advisor was well received by the entire school staff, even by those who did not have much contact with her.

Major Strengths

This kind of inservice can best serve the needs of children because the advice is based on concrete situations in the classroom. It was not abstract like most other inservice I have experienced. The advisor can help with specific problems involving specific children.

Demonstration teaching--it is so valuable to see someone else working with your children in your class. You feel that, if someone else can do it, so can you.

Advisor brought in a wealth of materials and ideas.

The immediacy of fulfilling requests--working in the classroom, bringing in materials, and most of all acting as a sounding board.

The kids loved her.

The advisor always fulfilled her promises.

The advisor was not defensive if her ideas were not heeded. She accepted praise and criticism graciously.

Not only were the advisor's suggestions useful, but they were also consistent over time. This is much more effective than a one-day workshop or visit.

The advisor had great experience and background in classroom environments. She also had a great skill in communicating this expertise. It is important to get someone who knows more than one, but who does not flaunt it. The fact that I viewed the advisor as a master teacher and not a supervisor is really important to me.

The advisor is adaptable to anyone's room and problems and she still provides solutions. She was extremely flexible.

Most resource people are in schools to do their own thing--use teacher and school for research, doctorate, etc.-- but the advisor seemed set in helping people and this was recognizable.

The relationships among teachers in our school were positively altered because of the advisor.

Major Weaknesses

Time constraint--only one day in the school means that the advisor spread herself too thin.

The process relies on the person--in this case we were extremely lucky.

Not enough time to sit and talk. Noon is not a good time--I need a break at noon and do not like to think much. In a program like this you need much more time to reflect on and discuss ideas.

The change process is slow, and therefore you need time to discuss change.

Advisor works too hard, pushed herself too much.

When advisor visited every week there wasn't enough time to absorb and implement ideas. Every other week would have been better.

It would have been good if the advisor could have been in school before the kids arrived--the distance the advisor had to travel was too great, however.

More of a time schedule as to visits would have been useful.

One year is really not enough.

It may be seen from these comments [illegible] crucial are the personality, openness, and expertise of the Advisor. [illegible] also appears that the most

valuable concept derived from these interviews concerns the desirable qualities of an Advisor rather than insight about the advisory process itself. Teachers did, however, seem to recognize the importance of time in the light of teachers attempting to change their current forms of practice; and this reflects quite heavily on this sort of inservice process.

Summary

The evaluation of this project seems to provide further evidence that the more traditional modes of inservice training need to be replaced with programs that provide help for teachers in their individual classrooms. Trainers, such as the two advisors, who assume roles of working in school settings over extended periods of time should possess certain qualities that will make them more effective in carrying out their tasks. In addition to having expertise in the form of broad backgrounds, varied experiences, and skill in demonstrating activities with children; advisors need to be honest, open, gentle, constructive, nondefensive, resourceful, and, most assuredly, committed to their work. In this case the advisors, in particular, and the project, in general seemed to be successful because the Advisors exhibited these qualities to teachers, and because they convinced the teachers they worked with that they cared.

Conclusions

The Advisors' field notes of their experiences contained many insights from which to refine the advisory approach we designed. Many points were procedural (e.g., scheduling, timing, etc.). Some points concerned the

definition of the advisory role; some concerned the process by which teachers became involved in the project.

In matters of role, hindsight suggests that the advisory role, as we conceived it, carries two types of role conflict. One revolves around the importance of refraining from giving teachers solutions to their problems and the threat to the Advisor's credibility that this role expectation seems to produce. Another concerns the expectation that Advisors support teachers whose ideologies diverge from their own. By definition, ideologies are strong, perhaps passionate, personal commitments. The extent to which Advisors can give support and advice in those situations is not known. It may be that teachers and Advisors should have a period of interaction in which they can explore the extent to which they feel congeniality before entering into a long-term commitment.

In matters of how teachers elected themselves to participate in the project, Advisors sensed a wide variety of teacher motives. Some were responding more to perceived peer pressure for change than to intrapersonal pressure for improvement. One teacher "used" the Advisor to bolster her "image" in the school as a superstar. Another first year teacher was reaching out for almost anything that would help her in her struggle for survival. Both Advisors remarked that there may be an optimum point in a teacher's career when the Advisory type of assistance is most appropriate. A brand new teacher may need authoritative direction. A veteran teacher may be flirting with change, but in fact be very bound by long-standing habits. When Advisory resources are limited, the identification of teachers' readiness to maximize the advisory approach would be helpful.

A final comment on the Advisors' field notes seems in order. Advisors noted persistently that teachers seemed to be lonely, to feel isolated and to enjoy the professional interaction the Advisors' visits made possible. Working with the field notes suggests to the senior author that Advisors also experienced loneliness and isolation. It seems reasonable to suggest that one suffers loneliness or isolation relative to tne companionship and closeness one has learned to need and expect. This suggests that teacher education--both at the preservice as well as inservice level--might include some effort to help teachers and potential advisors to set their occupational expectations with respect to companionship at more realistic levels.

Another theme in the field notes concerned the importance of enthusiasm and the need Advisors felt to be "up" or "high" during their visits. These comments point to deeper issues in the personal constructs of the majority of school people. It is not clear why enthusiasm and learning are so confused. The enthusiasm of teachers' responses to the advisory--or any other innovation--is a doubtful indicator of success. The seriousness of their responses may be more valid indices of effectiveness. Teaching youngsters day after day, year after year is a very serious affair which should be satisfying in the long haul.

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